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European war - Religious and moral aspect

THE ROOTS OF A WORLD COMMONWEALTH

BY

P. T. FORSYTH, M.A., D.D.

Author of "Theology in Church and State," etc.; Principal of Hackney Congregational College, London; Dean of the Faculty of Theology in the University of London; Late Lecturer at Yale University.

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THE ROOTS OF A WORLD-COMMONWEALTH

Prologue

THERE must be a large number of people who feel that the true dimensions of the present war are beyond human grasp for the time. Our intelligence is still benumbed both by its magnitude and its methods.

We can call it the real end of the Middle Ages, the last struggle of a belated feudalism. We could say several things like that. But already we perceive, what the great crises of the past reveal, that the leading actors themselves cannot measure the thing they are about, and are borne on the bosom of a conflict still vaster than that in which they feel directly engaged. Even a war like this is but a province of a profounder strife which runs through history, to realise which belongs to the insight of the master consciences and the deep religions of the race. Our chief religion describes that strife as the standing world-war for the Kingdom of God and its righteousness; and it regards it as the first charge on humanity. In modern lan-

guage it is the historic struggle for the primacy of the moral, the supremacy of conscience in human affairs—first of God's conscience, then of man's.

I propose to regard it chiefly, though not wholly, from this ethical point of view. I could say much I want to say if I spoke but of the Kingdom of man. If I allude to the Kingdom of God I mean for my purpose Christian civilisation. I am not going so deep as the theology of the matter, though all begins and ends there—in a theology of the conscience of God.

I speak a universal language when I dwell on public and historic righteousness, whose primacy is expressed in the modern principle of the supremacy of conscience for all life, public or private, or what the philosophers call the hegemony of the moral. If I speak of the Cross, I mean, for my present purpose, the principle of sacrifice for sacred conscience and not merely at a king's command. If I use religious terms it is because the last religion must be the last morality and the last reality; and I wish, for my part, to have nothing to do with a religion which is otherwise.

If the centre of our religion is not identical with the centre of our conscience, if the authority of a Church do not coincide with the authority for human morals, so much the worse for the Church. And for society there is nothing then but a double life, warring and distraught. That divided soul is the true cause of the slowness of man's conquest of nature. That double ethic is the real source of war in Christian lands. Religion comes to have another code than conscience, the nation has another standard than its religion. And the end is neither conscience nor religion,

but a national egoism fed by zealotry and controlled by nothing. Wars arise between nations because of that war in each nation and each man. If we have no moral and imperial certainty anything may be true or right. Religion then becomes a sentiment, a comfort, an insurance, only not a control. And therefore the controls do not control, and the sword does. And the base and bulwark of civilisation is not the sword but the conscience.

So the real issue in the conflict is not the most obvious. It is not discussed in press or parliaments. The most decisive, the final, forces are the subtlest, deepest, and often the most unwelcome. They are the forces of a historic, and even cosmic, righteousness, warring with evil and worth much blood. The crisis is not only tragic but demonic. There must be many, of various beliefs, for whom that righteousness runs through all great affairs, working deviously but continually to the top, as an idea and a power more deep and dominant than all our conventional notions of a providence. One of the great moral effects of war with such a foe as we now have is a new and awful revelation of evil; how awful only the conscience can realise which grasps the last public righteousness of the Universe.

I

The Gravamen

THE decisive thing in my own attitude to the war, like that of millions more, has not been political but moral. It has not been the peril to Britain of a keen rival established on the Belgian seaboard. It has been a matter of conscience and not diplomacy. It has been the deliberate and thorough repudiation by Germany of any moral control when it collided with her national interests, along with the barbarism which that entails. It has been the shameful sacrifice of moral to elemental passion, of the German nation (which is a moral thing) to the German race (which is not).

Germany might have brought Belgium to see that her suzerainty was the best thing for Belgian interests. She might have bought Belgium from the Belgians, or at least she might have bought Belgian independence, had it been for sale. That of course might have led to war with France, or England, or both, for reasons purely political and strategic. But such a war would not have rallied the whole of this country to its moral support. If Germany had not helped herself to Belgium in defiance of treaties as well as of humanity, if she had not done so on a principle which renounced

principle, if she had not justified herself in doing so by an explicit repudiation of public morality whenever it stood in the way of her national interests and armies —then there would have been the gravest division in my own mind, and in very many minds who are anything but pacifist cranks. Nay, the cleavage would have run down the middle of this country. It would probably have thrown against war the bulk of the working classes and the Free Churches.

And, so far as my own convictions go, and those of the people I most know or respect, were this for us a war of exploitation and aggrandisement, we should not only have nothing to do with it, but we should protest and oppose it with all our might. It is this grasping, amoral, and unhallowed civilisation, wherever found, that has brought the world to such a pass. It is a passion which is the death of human society. If ever there was a cause that justified national resistance unto the death for the world's sake it is the active protest against the creed (so fatal to civilisation) that a nation makes the conscience instead of the conscience the nation. The latter is our British belief, ever since the British genius spoke its great and saving word in Puritanism. Had the great German people ever risen to that moral height, even to the length of solemn regicide, had it risen to the conscience that founded America, there would have been one free nation the more in the world, and one that (with her splendid gifts now debased) could have been to the world of nations a blessing as great as she is now their bane.

II

"Heal Thyself"

I know that our British history, when we were dealing with other lands or races, has to its account (with all our glories) phases and stages of which we have reason to be much ashamed. We are none of us happy about the way we got India, and none of us proud of the way we lost America. As a matter of fact, we are more or less abashed. And we have striven to heal ourselves. We cast back to Britain's old Puritan strain, which once saved the nation from destruction but could not save it from relapse. Puritan theology may be out of date, but the Puritan majesty of righteousness cannot die. It remained the last of the heroisms up till now, when it has received a worthy peer in our present war, and a worthy consort in the American people. We have not lost our sense of the righteousness that makes us ashamed.

We repudiate the England of the Restoration and of the "bloods," as we do the Germany of the Junkers. We have carried our change even to repentance and amendment. Even at the worst we were not out for militarist world-empire. And at the best we have been recognised as trustees of justice over the world, and apostles of constitutional liberty. If you say we were

not worthy to be agents of a divine purpose, I reply that is not at our choice, but at His Who made of deserters apostles. And we have repented in a way far more to the purpose than days of humiliation in Churches. For a century we have produced the fruits of repentance. Having saved Europe from Napoleon as we saved it long ago from Spain, we have gone on to foster the small nations. We are trying to do belated justice to Ireland, hindered chiefly by the temper which produced the wars of religion in the seventeenth century. We have changed our treatment of peasantry and poverty everywhere. We have totally changed our attitude to India, which we hold for the Indians when they are ripe. We have given our franchise and opened our Constitution to our foes the Boers of South Africa and made them valuable friends. We can win the peoples we conquer, and neither carries malice. We are not yet forsaken by the spirit of reconciliation.

III

The World-Righteousness

This is very much more than a just war. It is not the clash of two huge egotisms, one of them with a rather better case than the other. That would not have rallied the nation or the nations. It would never have brought in America. Justice is a great word, but it is here too poor. It mostly means distributive justice, or fair play, what Burke calls commutative justice, which does not duly fit the vast, the universal, issue. We need a word more sovereign, one with more spiritual and imaginative tone thrilling in its moral chord. We need a term to describe constitutive justice. We need the greatest word in our moral language. We should rise to the word on which history and Bible crystallise—the word righteousness. "In the course of justice none of us should see salvation," but the course of righteousness means a moral redemption for all nations.

This is a war crucial for the New Humanity, for the world-righteousness of the Kingdom of God. It is a conflict of the kind which made Christianity at its heart a struggle for the world-righteousness in all nations. We stand in an agony against a passion of world-empire which frankly discards that idea. A

war merely just does not directly challenge the greatest of all moral realities, the Kingdom of God; but this does. A world-war does which is provoked by a nation that is frankly amoral amid its profuse appeals to God, and that challenges in the name of a racial civilisation the Kingship for which the Founder of its own religion stood and fell. That is at stake for which Christ died—the world-righteousness among the peoples of the Kingdom of God. Such a war is a function of the world's Redemption for all who have not sectarianised or sentimentalised that word. It is part of that historic translation of the world's deliverance by righteousness into the Kingdom of God which is the first charge upon the conscience of the Christian nations.

As to the Christian place of war I will only say this. If a nation has ceased to be a sandheap of warring atoms and has risen to one corporate life, then it has at least a quasi-personality. In that degree it must have a conscience continuous through the fleeting generations. And if it be said that it cannot have a Christian conscience, it may be owned that the national stage of ethic lags behind that of the best individuals or the highest ideals. But it does not therefore cease to be Christian, any more than Christ's treatment of lunacy ceases to be Christian because it took the imperative way of coercing demons in the name and service of the Kingdom of God.

Peace at any price is less than pagan; righteousness at any price, at the price of the blood of the sons of God, is the Christian principle. This is a war which rallies the conscience of the world, and ranges it

against the aggressor. And the conscience of the world reflects the conscience of God which makes the moral order of His universe. Of such dimensions is this war to a moral imagination adequate to the situation.

There have been wars for religion, for trade, for the forcing of what was thought to be a higher civilisation; and there have been wars of principle where, as against Napoleon, we stood for the sanctity of law against force that has none. Of the last kind is this war, only on a vaster scale, and without the mitigations of chivalry. It is as much more sordid than Napoleon's wars as Goethe's Mephistopheles is a mean spirit beside the Miltonic Satan. Milton alone could describe Germany's fall from heaven. It is a war on our part for the freedom of constitutional nations, federated against an empire which would erase, by military Ultramontanism, all nationality in its universal grasp of sea and land. The Emperor, the Head of the German Church, wages a war which he admits to have no relation to righteousness, but only to necessity. That is the bully's plea. And it seems to me Satanic.

What is attacked is neither Belgium, Britain, nor France. It is the foundations of civilisation. It is that moral element which prevents all civilisation from falling back into barbarism. It is the righteousness which alone can cope with the elaborate egoism on which mere civilisation stands, and which alone can arrest the sentence of death which a mere civilisation carries in itself. What we see is the moral collapse of a civilisation based on money and all it can buy as

the power of the Universe, a temper which has even infected the very Church as a benevolent concern extraordinarily expensive. A culture whether of the arts, the sciences, the industries, or the charities, taken alone, and without this moral yeast, sinks in the end to cruelty and lying, as the splendid Renaissance ended in Alexander VI. and Macchiavelli.

This righteousness alone establishes and exalts a nation. For the nation's security is its moral Christianity. And a nation is Christian not when a Church is established by law, but when righteousness is established by conscience within its borders. It is the public conscience that makes a nation Christian and assures its place. Neither a soul nor a people is saved in perpetuity even by the practice of individual virtue, but by the faith, honour, and service of a historic righteousness in its councils. That is what makes a nation great and keeps it so. The greater a nation is the more it is a loyal citizen of the Kingdom of God. In this light let us not fear what we may be unhappy enough to suffer, but rather what we might be weak enough to do. Let us despise danger in the pursuit of honour and duty. The worship of these things marks the democratic aristocracy.

IV

Brotherhood

There is no idea that is more in the air outside the Central Empires than the idea of equal fellowship or brotherhood. In our armies it may be said to be the ruling idea, and it will mean very much when they return. It is part of the humane movement which for a century has been spreading over those parts of Christendom which remain sensitive to spiritual ideas wider than national range, or to moral sense which rises above racial egoism. It goes round the world with the sun, linking Russia with America, and it seems to miss only the Turk and the Teuton. It selects its devotees from the highest class and from the lowest, passing by only the bully and the profiteer. It is the aspect of Christianity which most commends itself to the general heart and the popular mind. And that is all to the good.

But it has, or is apt to have, one defect. It is apt to be felt as a sympathetic idea rather than a moral. And that is lovely, but it does not wear.

It is more readily felt as an enthusiasm than as a principle or a righteousness, as a sentiment than as an obligation, as "Thou *mayst* love" rather than "Thou *shalt* love." Alliance without obligation almost in-

vites discord. Clans cannot co-operate (else Culloden would have been different); great nations can and must.

Brotherhood comes home to the crowded and glorious hour rather than to the silent seasons where the great powers master life. It may belong to the after-dinner eloquence rather than to the courage of three in the morning. It feels that man is one by his heart more than by his conscience, and great by his emotions rather than by his moral loyalties. "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin" we say. And so it does for an occasion. Does it in perpetuity? Is that the ground of our standing conviction and practice of human unity? Fellow-feeling is powerful to thrill us; is it all we need to establish and settle us as a human race, or even as a people? Can national unity rest only on racial enthusiasm? Is it more secure with the poets than with the puritans? Is racial prejudice and affinity a world bond? Is it not turned, in such a war as this, to be the despotism of one race at the cost of all nationality besides, and all freedom everywhere? The German brotherhood is as strong as ours, but Prussianism puts a moral blight on it.

What is to make fellowship perpetual and fraternity universal? What is to lift us above gusts of enthusiasm, and secure us in a standing reality of union? What is to moralise fraternity? What is to place brotherhood among the ethical and not merely the sentimental powers?

It is a greater ideal still. It is the passion for righteousness. It is righteousness that endures. It is the moral that is the royal, and the holy that is the eter-

nal. What binds the men of the army into their comradeship but the cause in which they fight, suffer and die? They long unspeakably to return to the freedoms and fraternities of peace, but by all accounts they are still more firmly and grimly bent on seeing this thing through and making an end of the evil in it. They are most one in their passion that the world-righteousness for which they came out shall be secured, that freedom shall be delivered from force, and democracy given room to live.

This is only one forcible illustration of the principle that fellowship has its real ground and last guarantee in righteousness, that brotherhood rests on fatherhood, that the trusty foundation of comradeship is not a mutual feeling but a common loyalty, that a nation has no final stay which discards conscience, disowns ethic, perverts righteousness to the right of the stronger, and falls back for its weapons on the crudest or cunningest forms of the struggle for existence. It is but another instance of the principle that a sound society of man rests on the righteous Kingdom of God, and that the nations that forget it shall be turned into hell—as in hell by its neglect we now are.

Fellowship is a fine and engaging idea, but the moral idea of righteousness with a universal royalty is a power greater and more splendid still. The wave of brotherhood is really carried on the tide of righteousness, and comrade loyalty rests on loyalty to the King of nations Whose throne is the conscience of a world. Great and dear are the hours when hearts flow together and are enlarged; but still greater and more during are those times when we combine to

realise the majesty of conscience, and the royalty of a right we do not make but obey.

This is the passion that honours a nation, and guarantees respect for all nations besides, which honours nationality as a sacred principle, and secures it in public responsibility. The fraternal passion of the hour can only be secured in the loftier passion of a righteousness which outlives all Time, and which subdues all space to something more than civilisation. And it is for this righteousness that our armies unite. This is the deep and real *Entente*.

V

Sacrifice

Besides fraternity, and in connection with it, there is another idea which has laid hold of the finest spirits in most lands—the idea of sacrifice. There are those who say and feel that without the spirit and practice of sacrifice no nation can exist. Of these some would even go to the extreme of saying that it is that on which the nation rests. The nation's health, they say, stands at last on the surrender of the egotism of the natural man, and not on the facilities it provides for it. Sacrifice like comradeship has become a passion, and a passion which has seized with great and noble power our youth—youth which we used to think egoist enough. There are some who have believed in sacrifice when they believed in little else. And indeed it wields a spell which only a lost soul can refuse to feel.

But here again we are called upon to reflect and question. And that not because we are victims of the critical temper, but, for one thing, because we are faced by the fact that the side we call right cannot claim a monopoly of such a virtue. There is as much sacrifice among our enemies as among ourselves, as there may be as much bravery. Indeed there is possibly more individual sacrifice in Germany for the father-

land than in England. The temper of a certain obedience is more strong there than anywhere on our side. It amounts to a docility which is even fatal, fatal to national dignity, self-respect, or freedom, fatal even to the care to be free. So that we are driven to ask if such sacrifice or obedience *per se* is really a moral power. Can it carry a world's civilisation? It is impressive, but does it renew its own strength? It has a great æsthetic value, and it calls out a chorus of poetry; but is it ethical, does it make necessarily for the last and greatest ends of society? Has it the staying power of moral kingship and its righteousness?

The truth is that neither sacrifice, martyrdom, nor obedience has in itself moral value. These features may rise to a kind of sanctity round a very defective moral core. You can be as devoted in sacrifice to an evil power as to a good. You can be as thorough in obedience to a usurping as to a lawful lord. Sacrifice is morally neuter. Its power is not in itself. Therefore it cannot be the foundation of a nation, nor the security of humanity. It cannot be a staying power. Everything depends on its moral interior. Everything turns on who sacrifices, and for what end. What is obeyed? Who is served? For what are we martyrs? To lay down life is not necessarily a moral action. A man can sacrifice his life for an illicit passion which but scatters tragedy all around. Everything turns on the cause or the person that commands the sacrifice. Is it for righteousness? It is not the amount of devotion that matters, but the quality, the dignity of it. And its dignity is a moral feature. The sacrifice of the German soldier becomes such a brutal thing because it

is offered to an amoral power without a soul, because the country, with all its virtues, has sold itself to mere militarism and has become the tool of a materialistic idealism. It has been made to believe in a civilisation that rests on that kind of power. It is sacrifice to a God without a conscience. And such a devotee is a minister of unrighteousness, Lucifer's viceroy, and an official in the synagogue of Satan.

The sacrifice that tells in the end is the sacrifice that holds most of righteousness as the ground of history and society, and means most for it. What moralises all sacrifice and all society from the centre of our religion is not merely a classic case of sacrifice, but something that establishes the final righteousness of the world, and recovers the moral soul of universal things. My point is that no amount of the humane virtues, no fraternities or valours, will save a nation or justify a cause if it defy the conscience of the race, as Germany with all her great qualities has done.

VI

Social Liberty

The war is a war for the world's liberty. It interests many of us most because it is not a war for Britain's place, except in so far as Britain is a trustee for that universal freedom. Liberty is another word which must acquire a moral content if it is to justify the convulsion of mankind. It is righteousness that gives the law to patriotism and consecrates liberty. We war with a people that claims the freedom to override mankind's liberty at will, with a power which has been ostentatious in its hatred of it, and which is up against the free conscience of the world. To give way to that power is to banish, with conscience, also liberty from history, and to reduce it to a *Privatsache,* a private fad. It is true that crimes have been done in the name of liberty; but they were caused by a liberty as lawless as is Prussian tyranny, as much of a law to itself, and one that cared more for place than for right, more for rights than for duties. There is a power which surmounts mere nationalism, mere patriotism, mere empire. It is the power of the world-righteousness, which I keep saying is the real issue in this war. To push empire, trade, or ambition at the cost of that, or to its neglect, is to serve the empire

of man's enemy, to say nothing of God's. It is certainly not worth human life and suffering on a world scale; for the whole world is not worth the moral soul. To lead minor nations into war for the greater nation's aggrandisement is to go into the service and pay of Satan; who always exacts the letter of his bond, and takes the uttermost farthing before he is done. It is the free conscience that makes the free man. And the free conscience is one that is at home in the humane righteousness that Germany discards for herself and fights in the world.

VII

Democracy

The issue in the great conflict has been well described, by a late comer who has said some of the finest things about it, as the effort to make and keep the world a safe place for democracy. It is a war for democracy against dominion. It is our last conflict with expiring feudalism, with its robber barons and its helot crowds. But what is the secret spell in either democracy or freedom? Do they mean the absence of all dominion, all control? Is righteousness and its sovereignty, just outside democracy, in a neutrality more or less benevolent? Is the whole range of the moral order of a historic world just parallel with democracy, as a co-ordinate power at an ocean's distance? Or is this order a living factor, and at last the dominant factor, in this as in every form of human society? Is democracy but self-government? But that might be a colossal egoism were it all. It might become Germanic. Is liberty but the right and room of every man or nation to be themselves, and develop, like German behaviour, according to the law of their own uncouth being? Is that really more than the very egoism of self-realisation which is doing all the mischief? It could be as cruel as the free love which

leads the wretched æsthete to discard his seduced victim when he is tired of her. The bond (if you please) has become unreal, and interferes with the free development of his personality.

Would the mere passion for democratic independence end war between democracies? Is all won for liberty when democracy wars down its political foe? What is to unite democracies? What is to protect liberty or democracy against itself? What is to *save* democracy in its own soul as well as to secure it in its own place? What is to save it from its internal foe and make it find its own soul? What is to deliver it from the Bourse lust which infatuates Germany? What is to rescue it from its isolation from human society, or protect it from political sectarianism, and a mere nonconforming conscience of "Thou shalt not"? What is to guard it from the moral anarchy of individualism, and make it a real factor of humane civilisation? What but the reign of the universal law, a national obedience to it, and a federation of peoples free in it? What but our great object of this war, so terrible in its righteousness?

The supremacy of conscience is the strength at once of the soul, of the nation, of humanity; and conscience is less an obedience to particular laws than that reverence for law as such which Germany has despised and defied. The supremacy of conscience is much more than its liberty; and its supremacy is its submission to Right. When free America joined this war she crowned the liberty that frees the slave with the loyalty that creates the servant; she rose from the hatred of coercion to the reverence for the moral authority

of the world. And the rally of France and England was an act less of egoism, and far more of obedience. It was not the conscience of supremacy, but the supremacy of conscience.

Can a fraternity, one asks again, live without a loyalty? Can it live on the loyalty of its members to each other, on the principle of taking in each other's washing? Can it live without a common loyalty to a righteousness it does not make but take, which descends on it out of heaven, and which is the power that rules the soul, the sun, and all the stars?

The first concern of human society is not to make its own laws, but to follow God's righteousness. The first interest of liberty is that authority. Liberty can reign but in righteousness. German amoralism means world-wide despotism. And the more universal the liberty is the more urgent must that righteousness be, and the more enduring its reign. Democracy is there for the sake of Humanity, and Humanity is there for the kingship of Right.

Humanity is more than fraternity. Democracy is something deeper than liberty. It is responsibility. The entirely free nations are the nations wholly responsible to righteousness—not to liberty; which might be the liberty to stand aside doubting in an abject spirit while the right was crucified. Nationality is not unchristian nor unrighteous. What is so is national amoralism. Democratic freedom is better than Teutonic obedience, not because it discards obedience and lives on the casual, the swaggering, or the pushing, but because it has a better obedience for its root; beneath it are the everlasting laws, and over it the

great white throne. The one thing that keeps civilisation from a return to barbarism is its service (to blood if need be) of the kingdom of a righteousness historic and eternal.

The more sound a democracy is the more it must find its strength in all that makes such a word as righteousness kindling, and the thing itself supreme. It is the great tonic for war-weariness. We are set where we are in the battle by a power that will not let us go. There is no discharge in that war. However faint we must pursue. It is not our own ends we serve. For we are finding our soul in the lordship of a cause much greater than our own, and in a realm for which we cannot do better than die, except as we live to serve it as our death does. The everlasting righteousness has called us to arms. To lay them down would be moral mutiny, of which the end is spiritual death; in which Germany, with all her vitality, is as a nation dead.

And the same passion of righteousness that both kindles nations and quells them must come to rule also the relations, within each nation, of soul and soul, and of class and class, ere we really have a better world. Without this passion religion is hollow and patriotism ignoble. What I call world-righteousness is the inmost soul of religion; and it makes our present conflict not indeed a war of religion but a religious war, a war for the moral salvation of mankind and its civilisation from a power that will do all this again and worse if such power be left it. *Divide et impera.* It will take the nations one by one and devour them for the glory, honour and immortality of the prince of this world.

Such are the considerations that rule not with one only but with many, many who hate the very name of war, who loved the old Germany with admiration and gratitude and who hope for very much yet from her powerful mind, chastened temper, and free future, who look to some League of Nations, and who are ready to turn even on their own land if ever it yield itself as the servant of public wickedness, and if it should rise up, in the name of whatever culture, to defy the humane kingdom of the righteous God of the nations.

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